Canada must lead by example on climate action

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Body

The Star's Heather Scoffield is travelling with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to the G20 Summit in Rome and the United Nations' Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, covering Canada's role in the shifting world order and the global fight against climate change.

ROME-China is nowhere, but China is everywhere - especially when it comes to climate change.

Normally at a G20 summit, alphabetical order dictates that the Chinese president would be seated next to Justin Trudeau when all the leaders gather.

This year, as leaders of the world's biggest economies meet here to design the global recovery and then move on to Glasgow to deliberate action in the face of climate change, Chinese President Xi Jinping is not attending either summit.

Instead, Xi is beaming in by video, and Trudeau was making sparse small talk with the far-less-powerful Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, sitting next to him instead.

But Xi is the elephant in the room all the same, both here and in Glasgow, where leaders are under pressure to set the world on track to confront climate change and to mount a recovery from the pandemic.

Failure on either front would be a disaster for a world that is sputtering out of the pandemic, all while dealing with climate-induced forest fires, flooding and drought.

G20 leaders talk a good game on how they will recover from the steep pandemic recession. They're agreeing to keep up the fiscal and monetary stimulus until we're all clear of the residual pain from pandemic restrictions.

But really, without the heft of China, with its massive volumes of exports and its key role in providing intermediate goods for the world's supply chains, the G20 statements are insufficient for getting the world back on track.

To be sure, the summit declared victory on vaccinating everyone everywhere on Saturday. Canada has just upped its commitment to donations substantially and G20 leaders will aim to promise to vaccinate 70 per cent of the world by the end of 2022.

But it's up in the air whether they will be able to score a clear win on climate change by the time they wrap up on Sunday afternoon.

The hope from countries like Canada is that the G20 leaders - who represent 80 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions - would deliver an ambitious vow to decarbonize the global economy by 2050, with some interim promise between now and then.

But China, by far the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases, is eyeing 2060.

A draft communique circulating on Saturday had the G20 leaders agreeing to limit climate change to 1.5 C, but without the iron-clad timeline that climate experts and many countries had hoped for.

The goal was for the Rome summit to hand over a robust mandate to the 200 countries at the COP26 summit in Glasgow and push the entire world into contributing to a credible plan that will curtail global warming in time to prevent catastrophe.

There's a reluctance to blame China outright though, even without Xi in the room.

That's partly because China is such a huge producer of emissions that every single move it makes on climate has an impact. Its recent announcement to stop funding coal plants abroad was substantive and will likely push other G20 countries to follow suit.

Meanwhile, a push to stop using coal within China on a tight time frame is probably unrealistic as long as there is no real alternative.

"It's a very easy narrative to beat up on Beijing on environmental policy," says Tristen Naylor, assistant professor of politics and history at the University of Cambridge, who is attending the summit as part of a team co-ordinated by the University of Toronto.

That's not lost on rival countries or even on climate activists.

When asked why the negotiations towards a concrete path to net zero were so difficult, Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland didn't point fingers on Saturday. Instead, she said it's important to recognize that some countries carry greater costs for ambitious action.

"It's important for us as a wealthy country to recognize that taking climate action can impose greater costs on some countries than on others, and it's important for us to recognize that and have real conversations about that. And that is what is happening here, and what I believe will be happening at COP26."

Mariagrazia Midulla is the head of climate and energy for the World Wildlife Fund in Italy and a key interlocutor between civil society and the G20 negotiators. She doesn't see any point in the blame game either.

Climate ambition "must be taken out of the geopolitical games that are played," she says.

Each country needs to lead by example by making its own ambitious commitments at the COP26 summit, she said, and not simply depend on the G20 or China to save the day. And then each country needs to show how it will make good on those commitments, building trust and momentum.

"We are getting there," she said on the sidelines of the summit Saturday.

Indeed, when she talks about climate change with the powers that be, she points to Canada - not because of our oil and gas production, but because of the scorching hot 49.5 C recorded in Lytton, B.C., this summer.

For her, it shows why every country needs to focus on its own contributions before telling others how to change.

"It is leading by example. You have to do your duty first, and then ask others to do their duty."

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